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## **Organizing Relief: A Review of the Records of the United Jewish Relief Agencies of Toronto, 1938-1953**

The Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre (OJA) is home to the records of the United Jewish Relief Agencies (UJRA), Toronto office. Created between 1938 and 1974, UJRA Toronto's records hold a wealth of information about the Ontario Jewish community's efforts to assist and settle refugees in the province. Although this collection has been used only infrequently by researchers in the past, its potential value to the study of Canada's Second World War era refugee crisis is tremendous.<sup>1</sup> This article will focus on the records in UJRA Toronto's collection created between 1938 and 1953. It will briefly review UJRA's history and provide an overview of the records and their value for further research.

### **A Brief History of UJRA to 1953**

The United Jewish Refugee and War Relief Agencies (UJR&WRA) was formed in 1939 by a number of Jewish agencies eager to assist the Jews being persecuted in Europe. These partner agencies included: the Canadian Jewish Congress's Committee for Refugees, the Canadian Organization for Rehabilitation Through Training (ORT Federation), the Federation of Polish Jews, the Jewish Peoples' Relief Committee, and the Joint Distribution Committee. UJR&WRA operated as an arm of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), sharing a President and Director and submitting a budget to its Executive Committee, yet remained an autonomous arm's-length agency.

Just prior to and during the war, UJR&WRA facilitated the entry into Canada of as many refugees as possible and provided them with assistance upon arrival. Although the number of refugees arriving during this time was small, UJR&WRA did assist a few groups of refugees: Czech farmers, rabbis and their families who were living in Shanghai and refugees living in Spain and Portugal. During the war, UJR&WRA also assisted the German refugees who had been interned in Canada (many of whom were Jewish). UJR&WRA helped to facilitate their release from the internment camps, find employment, enrol at various schools and secure student scholarships.

After the war, UJR&WRA changed its name to the United Jewish Relief Agencies (UJRA). UJRA organized a massive effort to assist the millions of Displaced Persons in Europe, providing food, medical care, and rehabilitation services. UJRA's role was largely to oversee and coordinate the immigrant assistance services available to refugees through a variety of local agencies including, Jewish Family and Child Services, Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, Jewish Vocational Services, Mothers and Babes Rest Home and the Young Men's Hebrew Association. UJRA also established temporary committees to help solve urgent needs, such as a Housing Committee to purchase and manage permanent housing for refugee families, a Loan Committee to adjudicate Ontario refugee applications for loans and manage the re-payment process, and a Deportation Committee to assist refugees at risk of deportation.

*Housing.*

Toronto, Dec. 23, 1948.

Mrs. Strom,  
Jewish Congress,  
150 Beverley St.  
Toronto, Ont.

Dear Mrs. Strom:

My husband, my three year old son and myself have been placed, on our arrival before Rosh Hashanah, at the Workmen's Circle School, 206 Beverley St. It was understood that we were to be there only a very short time, because it is a school and we actually occupy one class room.

We feel very unhappy, because the teachers have to search for a place to teach their students. Moreover, we have been asked several times to move, because they must have their classroom. We have tried very hard to get a room, but find it impossible, because people object to a child. We must move at once. We would be very grateful if you could find a room for us.

Sincerely yours,  
Mrs. [REDACTED],  
206 Beverley St.

A refugee's letter to UJRA Toronto regarding her housing situation, 23 Dec. 1948 [name redacted]. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 17, series 4-5, file 14A.

## The Records

Included among the 6 metres (18 banker's boxes) of textual records in UJRA Toronto's collection are meeting minutes, reports, correspondence, case files, subject files, statistics, and financial records with details on all aspects of UJRA Toronto's work. Not only do the records contain a wealth of administrative data (such as the types and number of clothing donated for the refugees), they also tell us a great deal about the larger socio-political environment in which UJRA Toronto operated as well as its challenges (such as the cultural differences between the refugees and the existing community) and successes (such as providing loans to help refugees establish businesses). Information pertaining to UJRA Toronto's work with all the various groups of refugees is well documented, including: the Czech immigrants settled as farmers, the orphans, the tailors and furriers, the internees, and refugees from Shanghai. The collection is also a wonderful resource for examining the integration experiences of refugees and their reception by Ontario society. In particular, the records of the Housing Committee, case presentations delivered at meetings of both the Loan Committee and Deportation Committee, and general UJRA Toronto case files are useful for understanding the individual experiences of refugees. Although presented through an organizational lens, they contain detailed information about the circumstances of specific immigrants, including their living conditions, employment

situations, physical and mental health issues, and language and cultural differences. They also reveal how the community responded to these issues.

### **Integration of Refugees in Small Ontario Communities**

One of the topics well documented in the UJRA Toronto collection is the role played by the smaller Ontario communities in assisting refugees and their relationship with UJRA Toronto. Scattered throughout UJRA Toronto's collection is information about the numbers of refugees settled in various Ontario cities, employment and housing arrangements for the refugees, financial support given by UJRA to the small communities, and the funds raised within small communities for UJRA Toronto. While these records demonstrate the desire within small communities to help the refugees, they also hint at the challenges of settling refugees in smaller cities with fewer resources and support services than Toronto.

For instance, the Jewish community in Chatham arranged housing and attempted to secure employment for two tailor families. However, the refugee families sent to Chatham were deemed unsuitable by the community. As Chatham's representative, P. Sherman writes in a letter to UJRA Toronto, "It is the unanimous decision of the Chatham people that the two DPs [Displaced Persons] who came here are not suitable in Chatham. There is resentment felt here because of their conflicting stories told and their approach."<sup>2</sup> It is unclear exactly what transpired between the Chatham community and these refugees, but the letter speaks volumes about the complex integration process faced by the refugees and the expectations of well-meaning communities. Still eager to help the "proper people" for Chatham, Sherman explains that although the community cannot guarantee immediate employment for the replacement families UJRA Toronto might send there, "We will see to it that they will not go hungry until they secure work."<sup>3</sup>

Another letter concerns the case of a rabbi who was hired in Sarnia. Initially the Jewish community in Sarnia had been eager to hire a rabbi, having been without one for some time. However, the community later contacted UJRA Toronto for help returning the rabbi to Toronto because "they felt that a small community such as Sarnia had not the means to cope with an individual as deeply disturbed as the rabbi seemed to be and that he would have to leave their community for Toronto."<sup>4</sup> These cases demonstrate how UJRA Toronto was thrown into the role of mediator in disputes between smaller communities and refugees and was called upon to help solve integration issues that arose. It is also interesting that in both these cases the roadblock to successful integration was not financial. However, they also highlight the potential benefits refugees offered smaller communities that lacked the refugees' specific skills and knowledge and the ways these refugees may have re-shaped and re-invigorated Jewish life in these communities.

November 18, 1951.

We, the undersigned, recent orthodox immigrants from Europe who are receiving support from J.I.A.S. or Jewish Family Allowance, are appealing to the Canadian Jewish Congress to procure for us farms as the Jewish Colonization Organization did. We wish to go out in a group of approximately 10 families in order that our religious duties (i.e. minyan mikvah, etc.) would not suffer. We preferably would like to go out in the district of Smithville, where Mr. Pashkas & Mr. Goldberger are already established. We appreciate what Congress, including its various offices, has done for us in moral and financial support, but on the other hand we wish to have our own homes, which is next to impossible to find in Toronto, and our own work which is also very difficult to find. That is why we are submitting this petition. We recommend Rabbi Dr. David Ochs to speak more fully on this letter at your next session, since he is most familiar with our problem.

Petition sent to UJRA Toronto from an orthodox group of immigrants, 18 Nov. 1951 [partial image]. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 17, series 4-2, file 9B.

Other records suggest some tension between Toronto and the smaller communities regarding financial resources. For instance, disagreement arose between UJRA Toronto and the Kingston Jewish community when UJRA Toronto refused to send funds to Kingston to assist a refugee, recommending instead that the refugee obtain assistance through the Department of Public Welfare. Ben Lappin defends UJRA Toronto's decision in a letter to Sheldon Cohen of Kingston, explaining that the small amount of money raised by small communities is allocated towards overseas relief, and when small communities ask for their allocation back

to assist the occasional new-comer who finds his way there, there is nothing left for overseas remittances, and this must be made up by the larger communities...there are even occasions (and these have by no means been scarce) where small communities have requested that a greater amount be turned back to them for assisting new-comers than they initially contributed to the UJRA and then the large community is required not only to make up the over-seas allocation, but to take from funds it provides for local services and divert them to the smaller community. The reason why these funds are paid is, frankly, to avoid friction between Congress and the smaller localities. There is always the implied threat that unless Congress coughs up, there won't be any money at all next year.<sup>5</sup>

These documents raise a number of questions for further exploration, including: What were the experiences of survivors who immigrated to small communities and how did these communities help them integrate? How did refugees shape the small communities in which they remained? How do the experiences of survivors who immigrated to smaller communities compare to those of survivors who immigrated into larger cities? How did UJRA Toronto and the smaller communities work together to assist the refugees?

This article offers just a small sample of the topics that can be explored with UJRA Toronto's collection. Since the collection touches on nearly every aspect of the refugee assistance work being done within the Jewish community in Ontario, it is of immense value to scholars in this field of research. Consulted in conjunction with related collections at the OJA and other archives, UJRA Toronto's records significantly contribute towards our understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by the refugees and by the agencies and communities assisting them.<sup>6</sup> Researchers interested in viewing this collection can contact the OJA by email at [ojainquiries@ujafed.org](mailto:ojainquiries@ujafed.org) or by phone at 416-635-5391. A researcher agreement may need to be signed to access some files containing personal information.

**1**

The Canadian Jewish Archives in Montreal holds the records of UJRA's National office, which focus on UJRA's work across all areas of Canada. The UJRA Toronto collection at the OJA is specific to UJRA's activities in Ontario and is an important complement to the UJRA National material.

**2**

Letter from P. Sherman to Mrs. Hellowitz, March 10, 1949. Ontario Jewish Archives (OJA), Fonds 17, series 4-3, file 21.

**3**

Ibid.

**4**

Letter from Ben Lappin to Sarah Rhinewine, March 27, 1953. OJA, Fonds 17, series 4-3, file 30.

**5**

Letter from Ben Lappin to Sheldon Cohen, October 23, 1953. OJA Fonds 17, series 4-3, file 30.

**6**

Some of the complementary collections at the OJA include: The Jewish Immigrant Aid Service of Toronto fonds, the Jewish Family and Child fonds, the Jewish Vocational Services fonds, the Samuel Posluns fonds, the Canadian Federation to Aid Polish Jews in Israel series, the Henry Cassel fonds, and the Canadian Jewish Congress, Ontario Region fonds. The OJA also holds a number of oral history interviews with individuals who worked for organizations assisting refugees as well as a few with refugees themselves.